

OUR SERIAL

"BACKS TO THE WALL"

By Captain D. G. Mitchell, M.C., D.C.M.

The world of flares, of thunder, of cold, and mud, went on, as though it were the normal, and would last for ever. Released from the fear of close-plunging shells, the cold seemed worse on this night. But orders came that each man could spend two hours of the night, in his turn, down in a dugout. I departed joyfully. My two hours being up, I again climbed the bank with renewed strength. Johnny Paakola, the Finn, was crouched over the gun. I barged into his near shoulder.

"Get below, Johnny, your turn for the spell."

"No, Mitchy," he said, "I stop. Zere is a raid on to-night, and I tink I get a shot at zese baskets." He would not budge, insisting that I take his turn below.

Now, I could just as conveniently spray an aggressive party as any war-like Finn. As well try to move a bogged gun as shift Johnny. The piercing wind clinched his words, and I went

wind clinched his words, and I went below again, wonderingly. Again the two hours fled in the comparative warmth of the dugout, and once more I faced the night. Johnny still stood like a rock behind the gun. My pleas that I was entitled to a share of any fun that might be going were futile against his impassive purpose.

Great was my surprise recently, on reading a book, "The Charles Men," that told of a forgotten war hundreds of years ago. The Russians were driving the Swedes and their Finn allies out of the Ukraine. Finns would stand in the snow beyond the campfires, on watch. They would refuse to come in at their appointed times for food and warmth, saying, 'No, I stay on watch.' A strange race, but what mates to have.

A line of red flares arose all along the enemy line. We tensed in expectation of a storm. But nothing happened. We knew later that it was probably the moment of his evacuation of the front line in his move back to the Hindenburg Line. So cold were the remaining hours of our watch that the lice did not move or bite.

At last another dawn showed in the faint flushing of the east. Seizing gun and panniers, we made our way into the Folly. Other teams drifted in as we

Folly. Other teams drifted in as we awaited our rum. One corporal reported ammunition and post blown up, but no one hurt. One man solemnly thanked God that he still lived.

Again settled in our dugout for rest in the daylight hours. But an increased tension was on every one, as our relief battalion was due this night.

The tide of mud had risen. Never did the lousy rathole look worse or more liable to fall in suddenly. Pigs, kept in a place like this, would sicken and die. Wild animals would desert it. We humans have a lot to learn. Aches and pains, cramps, "coal boxes" and aerial torpedoes kept us awake. Miss us for just a little longer, we would think, and we get our rest.

The prospect of sleeping stretched out on a dry floor, secure from enemy fire, seemed as an elusive heaven to us. But it had happened to us before, so why not again, provided one of these blasted five-point-nines did not write "finish" to our little chapter.

When it still wanted an hour to darkness, we packed up ready for departure. With darkness we again went on post, and listened breathlessly to every shell burst. In ones and twos the relief battalion arrived. They were in extremity, and each man collapsed

in extremity, and each man collapsed for a space until strength returned. When they had recovered enough to take an interest, we pointed out all things that they should know.

At seven o'clock we were due to depart, and even by that time two of the five could not stand on their feet. Our feelings were torn between relief at the finish of our watch, and an intense pity for those on whom it had fallen.

The Folly tried for the last time to hold us, and did indeed bog us all for a while. But we struggled on with our backs to the flares, and at last our feet met the boards. No more than our usual quota of falls and we reached the debris piles that had been Flers. We discovered then, to our dismay, that we had to go back to Mametz, an all-night march. I knew that I could not do it, and told the skipper so, asking permission to sneak into a deserted dugout to rest until daylight. I was peremptorily ordered to stay with the column. But at that I became stubborn, and claimed my right to be paraded before a medical officer.

A corporal took me to an aid-post. A weary M.O. glanced at me. "What's the trouble, lad?"

"Relieved from front line to-night, due to march back to Mametz. I am

due to march back to Mametz. I am too done-up to do the march, and I want permission to camp till daylight."

"That's all right," he said, in a kindly tone. In the blurred night shadows I found a dugout with only one occupant. He grunted as I lay beside him. Piercing pains lulled me into a sound sleep.

Cold, hungry and cheerful, I was up at daylight. Someone had pinched my rifle, but I found a tin of pork and beans. That evened matters.

A muddy scarecrow trod on boards to Delville. At a brigade cook-house I invited myself to a feed and picked a rifle off the dump.

Delville Wood was the same tale of graveyard mists, but I was going the right way. The Comforts Fund joint at the entrance came to light again.

Dinner was being dished out when I

rejoined the mob. They raised a cheer for their senior wangler, and then told me of the frightful trip I had missed. They had been arriving in ones and twos since 4 a.m., absolute physical wrecks.

CHAPTER VI.

RUSTLE OF SPRING

With the morass of Flers no longer waiting to engulf our sorely-tried carcasses, our spirits rose high. A diary entry may give an indication of the change:

As the sun rose high the fog was blown away, and her rays lit a world that was not torn by shells, on trees that were not splintered wrecks, and shone too, on the delicate green of young grass. A thrush sang, calling its mate. The mate answered. These trifling things towered all-important to us, for Spring and Life are taking over from Winter and Death.

The diary entry of 1 March described how we came to Henencourt, a delightfully remembered oasis in the stormy years:

We packed up and assembled our equipments in fighting order. After breakfast we moved off in blessed sunshine. After passing over a hill we saw Albert and the surrounding country from a new angle. Green valleys reached in three directions, dotted with little spire-topped villages. It seemed we were entering a brave new world.

a brave new world.

Beyond Albert, ploughed fields flanked the road.—We said farewell to the war where two enormous shell-holes showed to left and right. Jokes passed down the ranks as we marched between them, someone saying, “Rabbits must be bad about here.”

Through the winding streets of pretty, peaceful Henencourt we went past the gates of the big chateau. Half a mile beyond we turned to the right and followed a track through a tall forest. On the clear hilltop we came to a hutted camp, and there all the gunners were put together in one hut.

After tea I went to Warloy for a feed. It was a pleasant walk home. Every star shone like a diamond. Around the full moon was a great halo, and a soft wind stirred the forest.

Far down the road came a party of our chaps singing, “A Long, Long Trail A-winding.” A peaceful, restful night, seemingly far removed from wars and rumours of war.

To a stunned and disbelieving mob was announced that henceforth early morning parades were to be cut out. The morning parade would be from 9

The morning parade would be from 9 a.m. to 12.30 p.m., and afternoons would be devoted to sports.

So the "heads" were human after all! On the man with the foresight and intelligence to initiate this regime, may all the blessings rest. Sick, worn-out men became strong and active once more. The amount of food we could absorb during our recuperation was astounding. Walter and I would stroll into Henencourt each midday to the home of the pleasant Yvonne. There would we feast on "erfs" and "murfs."

Our first feed was a generous one. Four eggs each with fried potatoes, bread and butter and coffee. Yvonne opened her eyes wide at the order. The lot cleaned up we sent her off for four more each, with the necessary spud and coffee accessories. Then we sent for four more. Beyond words, Yvonne brought them in. With much gusto, I ordered another four, making a total of sixteen each.

Yvonne murmured, "Mon Dieu" faintly, as she went out to cook up the last order. I was all for sending for another plate, but Walter demurred, "She might think we are gluttons." But nature knows her business, and wasted tissue has to be replaced. A few

wasted tissue has to be replaced. A few Malagas put me at peace with the world.

On 5th March came a heavy snowfall. We regarded the beautiful mantle with complacent approval. During the afternoon sports a number of officers, The Bull among them, were on top of a steep bank. They were snowballing another group of officers. I shepherded a few men to a spot where a shot would catch us sooner or later. It did. So we returned the fire, after which they opened on us. Just what I wanted, give them a lesson in tactics.

I sounded the rally on my whistle, and a number of Diggers galloped up. Lined them up, detached flanking parties, and moved in line of skirmishes against the officers. They tried to stop us, but we were three to one, and with the first rush swept them off the ridge. All except The Bull. As leader, he was left to me. At three feet we slammed snow at each other, and I got better than I gave. But I gave plenty. So I blew my whistle and called the dogs off, leaving The Bull to his moral victory.

We waged a heavy fight against chats, and with the aid of hot baths and clean changes, managed to get them down. A diary entry of 8th March

down. A diary entry of 8th March gives an idea of how our spare time was occupied.

Afer tea I slipped in to Henencourt, had a good feed, and other forms of cheer, such as hot spiced wine, Then, in brilliant moonlight, in a cutting wind, we walked home.

I was in a beatific mood, but the others would persist in talking of war. They told of Pozieres, of men blown to pieces before their eyes, of a landscape decorated by heads, arms and legs of the freshly killed. of men smothered to death, dying of gas. Of fearfully wounded men making their way to the dressing station with a joke on their lips, and passing out in their tracks. I tried to head them off on to any standard topic, but they would not be turned.

In the living present the moon swung high overhead. The keen wind from the icebound north played on the harps of the forest. The tall swaying trees reached great arms to the sky. Glistening frosted ivy clung to the branches. A fire and good fellowship awaited me at home.

“God’s in his heaven—

township awaited me at home.

"God's in his heaven—

All's well with the world!"

Our hut was a place of comedies and comedians. One night after lights out, came a party, chock-full of Malaga. Big McMahon was carrying his mate on his shoulder. A fight had started between machine-gunners and bombers. When it was all over and every one had collected black eyes and swollen noses, no one knew who had fought whom, and why. Marvellous spectacles they were, when all were safely gathered in.

Johnny Paaklo's hang over lasted throughout next day. At dawn he was dashing round, throwing bottles and Finnish imprecations at low-flying planes. The orderly officer tried to place him under arrest, but Johnny said, "No compre arrest," grinning widely. The O.O. relented, and Johnny went to bed to sleep it off.

Day followed day—sunlight, rain or snow. We worked hard at our gunnery. An N.C.O. class was held, and at the examination, I rose to the dizzy rank of lance corporal.

I remember, while I sewed the stripe on, dissertating to the mob as to how they must in future treat me with the greatest respect, never use words starting with "B" in my presence and

greatest respect, never use words starting with "B," in my presence, and have my boots cleaned ready for parade. I got to the point where I was telling them that I would not insist on their standing to attention before me, and they need not call me "Sir." But I got no further, for they threw me out the door into the mud, stripe and all.

Everything contrived to raise our spirits. Bapaume had been taken, and the enemy still retired. Baghdad had fallen to our arms.

One day the battalion marched through Henencourt. As I looked back along the ranks pride rose high. Never before, or since, have I seen such a splendid sight as that evenly-stepping powerful body of men. The Bull's eyes reflected his feelings as we marched by. Efficiency, fitness, and high spirits were writ large on that display.

But, there were none to tell us that in a few short days nine of every ten would fall among the wire in the shambles of Bullecourt.

CHAPTER VII.

MOVING UP

The short and cheerful days were ending, for on 22nd March we received orders to prepare to move forward.

Never do birds sing so sweetly. never

Never do birds sing so sweetly, never is the sweep of forest-strawn country so beautiful as when we are under orders to move up. There is so little certainty left of life that we greedily try to make the most of it. In the gatherings at night a stranger might wonder at the high spirits of the old hands; the songs they sang; the tales they told. But these were the men who had endured the winter, and come from out of the blast of Pozieres. They knew that their lives were spent; that there was little chance of their survival. This they had weighed and accepted, but sought to wring from the fleeting minutes all pleasure there might be.

In contrast the new-comers were silent and thoughtful. They had much to wonder about, as to how they would react to the storm. Then they also would have become veterans, as these others—men for whom there was no future, only the careless present.

With "Cork" Daley as offside, I paid a last visit to Warloy. There, by divers tortuous methods we became possessed of a case of whisky. We rambled home through the forest beneath a glorious starry sky. The entire personnel of the hut awaited our return with a flattering certainty of our

turn with a flattering certainty of our success. Homeric tales there were, and laughter that rang strangely.

"If Fritz stonkers Mitch in the next stunt," said Matthews, "I'll go crook a treat."

"They'll get him, all right," someone assured him, "now he's a nuggunner."

But there were other opinions, freely voiced. "He's too bloody silly to get cracked. You notice that it's these stoopid —s that come out every time. He's been going since the Landing. Time he was dead, anyway."

Songs were sung, and listened to in absolute silence. Men who scorned any display of sentiment were these, who listened as if afraid to miss a note. Far away their thoughts were carried to places and memories made trebly dear by time, distance and the shadow of death.

At the conclusion of each song, banter would break forth anew, as though to sever sharply thoughts on which it were not wise to dwell too long. These were the original Digger meetings, of which post-war reunions are the palest of shadows.

At long last the night was given over to silence, broken only by the forest noises, and occasionally a distant

to silence, broken only by the occasional
noises, and occasionally a distant
rumble that spoke to wakeful ones of
our rendezvous. The morning of 23rd
March brought the thought-destroying,
cheerful bustle of departure. Ladders
packed, companies assembling, and the

battalion in swinging column of route
breaking into roaring song at the
"March at ease."

Tramping rhythm that led beyond
the newly-greened forest, the singing
of birds. Albert of the leaning Virgin;
streams of traffic, like unceasing rivers.

The air seemed to become chilly and
more still in the brooding zone beyond
Albert. But nature, with her promise
to make all things new, was already
at work. It was strange to see the de-
licate green of young grass among the
wreckage of war.

(To be continued)